

Activism

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

The history of activism is an incredibly active field of study in and of itself, but it also forms an important aspect of many other histories which focus on specific identities or social issues. For example, histories of war often examine anti-war movements, histories of health often document patient activism, and histories of ‘race’ often examine racist or anti-racist movements. Consequently, several areas of history have contributed important work to the history of activism, creating a (sometimes dissonant) chorus of voices recounting and defining activism and the activists who made it happen. This annotated bibliography explores this variety, highlighting key areas of activism scholarship around the themes of identity, health and social issues. These areas cannot be strictly divided and together form the varied history of activism.

Sources and methods

Sam Carroll, “I Was Arrested at Greenham in 1962”: Investigating the Oral Narratives of Women in the Anti-Nuclear Committee of 100’, *Oral History*, 32:1 (Spring 2004), pp. 35–48.

The Greenham Common Peace Camp, a series of camps established to protest against nuclear weapons being placed at RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire, England, was so remarkable that histories of Greenham Common represent an important subsection of the history of women’s activism and anti-nuclear activism. This article is particularly useful in demonstrating how

oral history can be used to capture histories of activism. It also illuminates the links and dissonances between the anti-war movement and the wider Women's Liberation Movement.

Cait McKinney, 'The Internet That Lesbians Built: Newsletter Networks', chapter 1 in their *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), pp. 33–66.

McKinney's book offers both a history of queer feminist activism and an important argument for viewing the dissemination of knowledge, and the building of networks, as an important form of activism, dubbed 'information activism'. Historians of activism have increasingly been drawing on born-digital sources, writing histories which grapple with how the internet changed activism. This chapter, and McKinney's whole book, offer an excellent starting point for this kind of work. The chapter on the Queer Herstory Archive is also very useful for understanding the ways in which archiving and history-making can be forms of activism.

Nikolas Papadogiannis, Rachel E. Love and Terry Anderson, *Trajectories: AIDS Activism in Western Europe* (St Andrews: University of St Andrews, 2022), <https://taa.st-andrews.ac.uk/comic/>

Unsurprisingly, many historians of activism treat their discipline as a means of engaging in activism, documenting past activism to inspire change and solidarity in the present. This co-authored comic offers an interesting example of this kind of public history-making. Papadogiannis's wider work also looks at left activism in Europe.

HIV/AIDS activism

Dan Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle Against HIV/AIDS* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

Histories of HIV/AIDS activism form an important and previously understudied area of activism history. This is an area undergoing a new wave of scholarly interest. Royles's book is part of this new wave and explores a variety of African American responses to HIV/AIDS. It takes an intersectional case-study approach, examining a variety of different activist organizations, setting their perspectives and approaches to AIDS within regional and identity-specific contexts. This allows the book to examine the influence of faith, gender, sexuality, region and Reagan-era politics upon AIDS activism with breadth and depth.

George J. Severs, *Radical Acts: HIV/AIDS Activism in Late Twentieth-Century England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

Severs's book, like his wider work, explores HIV/AIDS activism in England, here examining both everyday and radical activism. Blending written archives and oral histories, the book explores the specifics of AIDS activism and its impacts in a variety of situations, from work, to university, to church. This would be a great place to start for anyone interested in the new wave of histories of HIV and activism, or those interested in how oral histories can be used to enrich activism histories.

Regional, national and transnational histories

Hannah J. Elizabeth, 'Recovering Mothers' Experiences of HIV/AIDS Health Activism in Edinburgh, 1983–2000', in Janet Weston and Hannah J. Elizabeth (eds), *Histories of HIV/AIDS in Western Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

Elizabeth is another scholar working on the new wave of AIDS histories, focusing much of their work on women and children. Their chapter, alongside others in this edited collection, explores HIV/AIDS activism from a regional perspective. These regional perspectives demonstrate the importance of local and national contexts – legal, economic, political, geographic, social – for shaping the kinds of activism that occurred and how it was experienced. The chapter explores how HIV-affected women, an oft-neglected group, experienced 'quiet' or 'low-key' health activism in Edinburgh, arguing for a definition of activism which includes acts of disclosure and visibility, alongside more visible forms of direct action.

Kristin Hay, "More than a Defence Against Bills": Feminism and National Identity in the Scottish Abortion Campaign, c. 1975–1990', *Women's History Review*, 30:4 (2020), pp. 594–612.

Hay's article explores how internal politics and geographies, alongside nationalism, shaped Scottish abortion activism. The article demonstrates the need to take both regional and national contexts seriously and should remind us that the UK is made up of four nations shaped by their own histories, laws and perspectives. The article also demonstrates how combining archival and oral history research can capture the emotional and political context of distinctive social movements more holistically; for example, by capturing a sense of the collective knowledge, experience or motivations which shaped a specific activist's or group's actions.

Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska and Laura Kelly, 'Anti-Abortion Activism in Poland and the Republic of Ireland c.1970s–1990s', *Journal of Religious History*, 46:3 (2022), pp. 526–51.

Another important area of abortion activism scholarship documents anti-abortion movements, an area that has received growing scholarly interest.

This interest is perhaps motivated by recent high-profile changes to abortion legislation in a number of national contexts, including the Republic of Ireland and Poland (the national contexts explored in this article). It also builds on fruitful scholarship examining American anti-abortion activism such as the work of Karissa Haugeberg and Mary Ziegler. Kuźma-Markowska and Kelly also demonstrate the growing move towards comparative and transnational histories of activism, redressing an occasional tendency in the scholarship to overstate national differences or representativeness, or to favour the histories of certain cities (e.g. London and New York) or nations (e.g. the USA or England).

Beyond left-wing histories

Jennifer Crane, “‘Save Our NHS’: Activism, Information-Based Expertise and the ‘New Times’ of the 1980s”, *Contemporary British History*, 33:1 (2018), pp. 52–74.

Not all activism attempts to change the status quo; some activism seeks to maintain beloved institutions. And, as Crane argues here, some activism works within, rather than against, the systems and rhetoric of its time. Like many works in the history of activism and health, this article also highlights the indistinct line between activism and volunteering, offering an account of how these blurred borders emerged in the 1980s, specifically around the NHS.

Kathleen M. Blee, ‘Becoming a Racist: Women in Contemporary Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups’, *Gender and Society*, 10:6 (1996), pp. 680–702.

While histories of activism frequently explore the work of activists whom we feel sympathy towards, histories of activism that focus on groups we find deplorable form a neglected but growing and important area of the historiography. Blee has written extensively on the history of women’s right-wing activism via their membership of the Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups. Her work documenting this kind of activism also explores the challenges this kind of history presents for the historian and offers insights into the ethical quandaries involved in this kind of research.

Conclusion

Histories of activism continue to form an important and active area of emerging scholarship. Recently, historiography in this area has sought to capture regional histories alongside broader national stories, or to document transnational movements. Another development within activism scholarship is a focus on capturing ‘quiet’ activism and ‘information activism’, alongside important histories of direct action and protest. Knitting together the varied forms that activism can take allows for a more intersectional approach which reflects the many lives touched by activism.